The Three B's of Jewish Identity

By Rabbi Judy Kummer

Rosh Hashanah 2025/5786

A man comes to the Rabbi and says "Rabbi, I'd like to have you to make me a Cohen." (Now, you and I will know that "Cohen" means priest; for the benefit of people who don't know, this priestly lineage has been carried down over the course of hundreds of generations. It is strictly a hereditary title.) The rabbi says to the man, "I'm so sorry, sir. I'd love to do what you wish, but I can't make you a Cohen." The man pulls out his checkbook and says "I'd like to make a generous donation to the synagogue – – $10,000 – – if you would make me a Cohen." The Rabbi says, "I'm really sorry, sir, but I can't make you a Cohen." The man says "$50,000. That's my final offer." The rabbi knows all good that can be done with a $50,000 donation and decides to go along with the man's request, even though he knows it's not legitimate. The rabbi makes up a ceremony, and at the next Shabbat morning service, he calls the man up during the torah service, and with great pomp and circumstance he pronounces him a Cohen. The man is overjoyed; he is beaming.

At the very elaborate kiddush luncheon the man has paid for following the service, the Rabbi walks up to the man and says to him, “you know, I never asked you why it was so important that you become a Cohen.” The man said “well you see, Rabbi, it’s simple – it’s a tradition in my family. My father was a Cohen, my grandfather was a Cohen…”

My friends, many of you know that my work during the rest of the year includes chaplaincy, or spiritual care and counseling. I have the privilege of meeting with people and hearing about their lives. I hear about issues small and large that are significant or are troubling to them. Often we are discussing issues that relate to their Jewish identity.

Often someone will say to me, “I know I’m Jewish, Rabbi, but I’m not religious.” And my standard response to them is, that is not a problem! There are lots of ways of being Jewish. It’s ok if you’re one kind of a Jew and not another. It’s Ok to find your personal definition within the wide spectrum of ways of identifying as a Jew.

Jewish identity is multifaceted, embracing lots of different aspects of ourselves. The more stories I hear about people's inner lives, the more ways it seems to me that there are of identifying as Jews. A person may know himself as a Jew because he goes to shul – to synagogue services-- every week; a person may know she is a Jew because she feels she belongs to the Jewish people or has a moral code she acts on; he may know he's a Jew because he is educated in Jewish history or knows the Hebrew language or has seen every Holocaust film made in the last half century, or speaks Yiddish, or at least knows what chutzpa means…

All of these count as ways of identifying as Jews.

In his book "Sacred Fragments," Rabbi Neil Gillman speaks of Jews identifying by *belonging, behaving, and believing* – – and it gladdened my heart as a Reconstructionist rabbi to know that Rabbi Neil Gillman attributed this way of thinking to his Jewish Theological Seminary teacher, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, who was the founding theologian of the Reconstructionist movement.

I'd like to focus today on these *3 B's of Jewish identity: belonging, behaving, and believing*. (How great that they all start with the same letter of the alphabet! Who doesn't like alliteration?!) There is a fourth additional way of identifying Jewishly that I will address at the end.

Perhaps these 3 (belonging, behaving, and believing) can go in any order, but I think – and I echo Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's thinking – that for many Jews they go in this order: first belonging, then behaving and last believing.

I invite you to think about how you identify Jewishly. What are your thoughts as we go through this information?

So let's focus first on belonging. For many of us, being part of the Jewish people is significant, and even foundational. Many of us have grown up in families where it was important just to BE Jewish, and some have come to Judaism as adults and have created Jewish homes, homes where it was important just to BE Jewish.

For many of us, joining Jewish organizations like synagogues or Jewish community centers or Hadassah or Jewish veterans'

groups is our expression of belonging. Feeling connected with the state of Israel is also a reflection of this way of identifying, of belonging to the Jewish people.

We may take note of Jewish names when they come up on TV or in movies or in the newspaper or in literature; many of us react viscerally, noting with pride the actions that some “MOT’s” (members of the tribe) have committed – and we may cringe with shame at the mention of a Harvey Weinstein or a Jeffrey Epstein; they are prime examples of the “shanda” reaction, that gut response of shame or disgrace at a relative’s despicable actions.

To balance this negative association with belonging to the Jewish people, we note the many Jewish Nobel prize winners, including Albert Einstein, Henry Kissinger and Eli Wiesel; in fact, as a Wikipedia article on Nobel Laureates states,

“Of the 965 individual recipients of the Nobel Prize and the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences between 1901 and 2023, at least 216 have been Jews or people with at least one Jewish parent, representing 22% of all recipients.” 22%! Kind of remarkable, considering the fact that Jews constitute only 0.2% of the world's population!

We take great pride in the distinguished achievements of our co-religionists, and we feel shame in regard to those who have publicly done wrong; all of these responses are aspects of this category of identifying Jewishly that we are terming “Belonging.”

Jewish peoplehood, that sense of belonging to the Jewish people, ignites in us a spark of connection with fellow Jews, even if we’ve never met them or even if they come from half a world away. How many of us were horrified at the Oct 7 attacks and felt personally connected to the terrible events of that day, even if we didn’t know or weren’t related to any of the people who were murdered or taken hostage? To belong to the Jewish people is to feel the pain in our own hearts when a Jew half a world away is hurt; it feels like it’s bleeding right here.

We come back to our three B’s: *belonging, behaving and believing.* In Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan’s analysis, it is often out of a sense of *belonging* to the Jewish people that we come to the second B, *behaving* as Jews.

Again, this is one of those multifaceted terms that include lots of different possibilities; there is a wide spectrum of behaving Jewishly. So how do we "do Jewish?" There are many behaviors, ways of taking action in life, that are informed by our Jewish tradition.

We may be religiously observant, being a regular at shabbat services or attending the High Holiday services we are at right now, or doing any of the multitude of Jewish mitzvot and traditional practices, like keeping kosher (to whatever level we may do so) or giving tzedakah (charitable contributions.) We may express our Jewish identity by reading anything and everything about a particular area of Jewish interest, like the Holocaust or Jewish philosophy or Jewish current events. We may take a class in Hebrew or in Jewish history or literature, or be committed to being informed Jewishly. We may belong to a Jewish choral group or be active environmentalists, caring for the earth because of Jewish teachings that encourage stewardship or awe and wonder at nature's miracles. (As a committed gardener, I love to tend to my compost -- and I do this out of my Jewish values of caring for the earth and leaving it better off than I found it. For me, this is one way of behaving, Jewishly; I am a proud Jewish composter!)

Behaving Jewishly can also be expressed by those who would not darken the doorstep of a synagogue, but for whom it is important that they light candles on a Friday evening before dinner at home. Behaving Jewishly for some involves standing up for Israel, or participating in political demonstrations, or attending Jewish concerts or plays or films – – or in being guided in our behavior by a strict, sometimes unwritten, code of ethics and morals. All of these are ways of *behaving Jewishly*. They are things we *do* – and we remember through them that our Judaism is a religion of doing, of taking action, of having an effect on others and on the world around us.

Our third category, the category of *believing*, is the most challenging for many Jews, and many never find their place of identity here. This is in sharp contrast to Christianity, where believing is the first or the foundational category of Christian identity; by definition, according to Christian clergy colleagues, if you are a Christian, you believe in God. For Jews, however, this may not be the case; belief in God may or may not be central to many Jews, and it may not be a place they ever get to in their lives.

As we probably all know, there are many Jews who would say that they don't believe in God – and they are perfectly good Jews! We could mark this as a phenomenon of post-Enlightenment Judaism.

A brief history lesson: after the secular Enlightenment in the 1700's, when reason began to hold sway in place of faith – which was actually a cataclysmic change – – there followed a Jewish Enlightenment, when Jews also embraced reason, often over faith. It is perhaps from the 18th century Jewish Enlightenment period onward, that Jews have felt free in acknowledging that if they had a hard time seeing something, they might have a hard time believing it as well; it may be hard to maintain a belief in something they could not see with their own eyes.

And yet for many Jews, even in rejecting the traditional concepts of God, there still is a sense of spirituality, a sense of spiritual yearning, possibly even yearning for connection – – with whom or with what, these Jews themselves may not know or may not be able to say.

This reality that Jews have not always connected Judaism with a belief in God and with spirituality has led many Jews either to leave Judaism altogether, or to veer away and supplement their Jewish identities with a connection with Buddhism, where they have sought out spiritual expression, often through contemplative practices. Ironically, the reality is that those same or similar contemplative practices do exist in Judaism – – some of them at least 2000 years old! – – but sadly, these contemplative Jewish spiritual practices were not resources that these seekers were able to find in Judaism before heading away into the Buddhist world. I learned recently of an extraordinary statistic: it seems that approximately 1/3 of American Buddhists are of Jewish descent! Remarkable, no? The wish for spiritual expression and possibly for contemplative practice sings strongly in the hearts of many Jews. (This is actually the reason that the IJS, the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, was founded; if you are at all interested in Jewish spirituality and mindfulness and contemplative practices, I encourage you to look into the IJS's offerings.)

In my work as a chaplain, I often encounter Jews who will tell me they don't believe in God – and as we talk further, I learn that they don't believe in the *traditional* image or images of God. It is not

unusual for me to hear from people struggling with serious illness that they don't believe in God -- and a moment or 2 later, they let me know how angry they are at the God they just said they didn't believe in. In spiritual care, we chaplains learn pretty quickly that theological consistency is not the goal…

For Jews, the category of believing is yet another very broad category. It includes those who believe in the traditional image of God, and it also includes people who don't believe in that image.

There is a perception that Judaism advocates the traditional imagery of God, that image of an elderly white man sitting on a cloud or a throne, who, if we are good, will send down rain in its season, and if we are bad, then beware of the thunderbolts. This image is threaded throughout our prayerbooks and our Torah readings. For some of us, this particular traditional image "works" theologically, and to those people we can say, "how amazing, and how wonderful!"

For those Jews for whom the traditional God concept does not quite work, there is a challenge in not rejecting Judaism and Jewish beliefs altogether; the effort then may be in trying to find

ways of expressing our Jewish spirituality and beliefs so they will still allow for some intellectual and theological integrity.

If this is the case for you, I encourage you to seek out alternative images of a divine presence. We might think of God perhaps as a spark of the divine implanted within us, which may challenge us to be better than the best people we can be, or perhaps as a creative force or a power in the universe that, again, might challenge us to be morally exemplary human beings and to act in morally exemplary ways.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote of his perception of God not as the source of illness or trauma, but as a force that would would stand with us in support, as we go through challenging times in life.

I know one rabbi whose alternative and creative conception of God is of a gentle softness in the universe, that place we can turn to in life for a little gentleness and a little give. This is an image that might relate to our Avinu Malkaynu prayer, which we sang earlier in our service, where we are asking and even pleading with God to be gracious and compassionate with us.

There are in reality lots of different ways of believing Jewishly. I encourage you to consider which image or images of a divine presence work for you and might offer you support in this moment.

To this list of three areas of Jewish identity, the 3 B's, belonging, behaving and believing, I suggest that we add a fourth B: *becoming*.

When we read of Moses interacting with God at the burning bush, and asking God what God's name is, God replies, "*eheyeh asher eheyeh* -- I will be that I will be" – all *future*-focused. There is a way in which we Jews view holiness as being about what unfolds, from this present sacred moment into the future. We may acknowledge the past, and we may use it as a springboard into this present moment, but as Jews, our focus is on the future. We are the people for whom the question about whether the Messiah has come elicits a response of "not yet." Judaism itself is ever-becoming, ever–changing, responsive to the changing needs of Jews alive in this moment. For us as Jews, the effort is all about who we are becoming, who we are turning into. For us as Jews,

the challenge is about how we can become the best people that we can possibly be.

So I return to my question from earlier in this talk: how do you identify Jewishly? Is it more about belonging for you, or about behaving or believing, or some combination of the 3? If others were to look at you and the way you live your life, is this the same conclusion they would come to? If not, are there changes you would like to make in your life, so that what is most important to you about your Jewish identity comes through loudly and clearly?

My friends, this High Holiday season is a time of opportunity, a time of possibility and of change, a time when we are encouraged to examine our souls and our lives and commit to becoming the best version of ourselves.

May our efforts to change bring us into a newer and better way of being, and may our Jewish identities -- and our Jewish community -- be stronger as a result. And let us say Amen. Shannah tovah!